

RUSSELL SCOTT VALENTINO

EDITOR'S NOTE

A couple of years ago, on a trip I took across Eurasia,* somewhere in the vast nothingness between one Siberian village and another, our train stopped where there was no station and no light. I came out of my compartment, stood next to another passenger, who was smoking at the open window, and asked where we were. “*Nechistaia sila*,” he answered between puffs. I looked out and understood he was joking. The words, which literally translate as “unclean force” or “impure power,” are a folk reference, though I knew them from Nikolai Gogol’s stories set in the Ukrainian countryside, where lonely spots like this one were typically haunted and often represented as demonic. “Devil’s Landing” might be appropriately evocative.

The reference immediately conjured up a whole range of associations and an entire worldview, a way of framing and making sense of things, most often things encountered unexpectedly. I suspect I’m no different from most readers of *TIR* in having long ago acquired the habit of this way of approaching the world, grabbing little chunks of it through phrases, images, characters, and scenes encountered in books, a product of reading too much in one’s formative years no doubt. The search for concise, telling frames and wordings, once you realize you’re doing this, can become a life pursuit. Words are always key, as individuals and in groups. These capture and convey distinctive visions of the world and interactions with it in the manner of folk taxonomies, like names for reindeer among steppe dwellers in Mongolia, species of fish in Polynesia, or, closer to our own experience, descriptive phrases for wine or perfume.

I am reminded of Christian Bobin’s lyric reflections on reading at the beginning of *A Little Party Dress*, where he writes, “One day you recognize a word on the page, and you say it out loud, and it’s a little piece of god departing, a first fracture in paradise. Then you go on with the next word, and there is nothing left of the universe, which once was whole; there’s nothing left but sentences, lost continents in the white of the page.” Words, the white spaces that surround them, and the pages on which they’re printed or not printed become not just what you look at but what you look through, how you see, appreciate, understand, come to terms with. And then there’s another step, which Bobin doesn’t quite get to, but which critics, teachers, and, of course,

editors of literary magazines understand intimately: you start to evaluate how well, how convincingly the words and their *contorni* evoke the world, this one or some other.

In editing TIR these past several years, I have come to realize that this is how I read most often, and that this is probably why I'm not an especially fast reader. An affliction when the writing is bad, a joy when it is good, this way of reading would have handicapped me severely for the job of editing a literary magazine had I not been fortunate to work with a host of professionals who did most of the work, while I, most often, just said "yes." As editor of *The Iowa Review*, I have been privileged to work with enthusiastic, energetic genre editors and volunteers doing the bulk of the initial reading, knowledgeable senior editors to whom I could turn for advice and counsel, experienced designers and web consultants, and a managing editor with the skills and experience to run the whole thing with dexterity and poise. Reading submissions has been a particular joy for me because, more often than not, I got to read the especially good submissions, and that was the case thanks to these colleagues.

Thank you, then, especially: Michael, Emily, Jenna, Sarah, Catherine, Bryan, Rae, Hannah, Jeremiah, Mal, Elliott, Nikki-Lee, Robin, Nick, Hugh, Lauren, Amber, Jenna (again), and Lynne.

What I mean by good writing is something that the fundraisers will tell me I need to be more specific about. You can't, they say, just say we take only the best stuff, or we publish only fine fiction or high-quality poetry. You have to be more specific if you want to invite people to join you in your mission (another favorite arts funding phrase). Contrary to what Lawrence Venuti suggested in his piece for our forum on literature and translation (iowareview.uiowa.edu/page/towards_a_translation_culture), workshop culture, especially the kind of workshop culture that is linked to publishing in literary magazines, is not always dominated by a "bellettristic" mindset, though it is certainly dominated most often by one focused on belles lettres.

The best answer to the question of what TIR publishes and why is to look at what it has been publishing, because there is an aesthetics to it, and there has been for some time, though it is never thematic per se, never prescriptive, and never formulaic. During my time as editor, it has probably pushed towards international literature somewhat (and I am very pleased to note a handful of translated works in this issue), though the focus has not shifted considerably away from reflective essays, poetry that pushes the boundar-

ies of what poetry is often expected to be, and fiction that is authentic and focused on voice and character. I have been particularly interested in writing that evokes the world that Bobin thinks we lost when we started to read, because I suspect in fact it is the opposite: namely, it is writing we need in order to see the world again, to feel it and smell it and taste it.

For this, sometimes you need soup and tones, a bridge, a shoe, a job, or oh, that munchy dizzy. Sometimes you need a big top, a big big top, or a particularly successful—wouldn't you say?—line, or you really need your mom to hold you down while the needle pierces the skin of your back, or to watch an old movie, when your father looked so young, tossing a Frisbee. Sometimes you need to be taken a devil of a long way from anywhere and brought back, to travel far away from your supposed self, get diagnosed, lay hands on your own body, lose almost everything. Almost. Sometimes you need to make something out of nothing, a lot of nothings. Sometimes you need to be reminded of how beautiful eternity is and how non-eternal beauty is, unbuttoning your heart one blood vessel at a time, building bridges with your nose, or the mucus thereof. Or it helps to have the surprise of intellectual, fractured lyrics, or just that hint of violence in dissolution (a gas leak? an explosion?) and in personal life (that shotgun), witnessing the exploration of the words in which we sit, in a chair, in the air, good. Sometimes we must save a gourd for breaking over our heads on our wedding day, our eyes *ojo*, our lips made up with red *achiote*. Sometimes we need to have a dog that we've stolen look us in the eye, or have someone calculate the implacable arithmetic of one, howling it like a cat in heat as we dream of Valhalla, giving each other our bodies, unlocked locks, lacking all purpose and all restraint, filled with risk. Sometimes you really need to remember braking your childhood bike in a Trojan army of wet leaves, there where the earth meets the weeds, oxidizing under a topic brilliance, extruded little white squirts, flung from the sun, in the least tongue. Sometimes we need to hold watch, watch trucks thicken, bodies soften, suns sidle.

**To read more about Russell Valentino's trip through Eurasia, visit his blog entries iowareview.uiowa.edu/crossing, iowareview.uiowa.edu/crossing2, iowareview.uiowa.edu/crossing3, and iowareview.uiowa.edu/crossed.*